



Dates

Health Benefits of Dates

Dates are fruits loaded with vitamins, minerals and fiber. Naturally sweet, they make a whole food substitute for refined sugar. Medjool dates are the most popular and commonly found in grocery stores.

1 large dried, pitted Medjool date provides:

- 67 Calories, 1.5 gm protein, 2 gm fiber, no fat, no cholesterol

Potential benefits of consuming dates:

- Good source of potassium for heart health, nerve function, and lower blood pressure
- Contain calcium and magnesium for strong bones and teeth, energy production, muscle contraction and cellular communication
- High in polyphenol antioxidants to lower cholesterol and plaque
- Improve gut health and may inhibit development of colon cancer
- Chop dates into cereal, salads or cookies. Blend dates with water to make syrup which can be used in place of sugar in recipes
- Stuff pitted date with walnut half, pinch closed and roll in flax meal, or stuff with ground pistachios and unsweetened coconut

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Delectable Dates**By Stephanie Polizzi, MPH, RDN, DipACLM**

Dates are the sweet, chewy fruit of the date palm tree. They are possibly the oldest cultivated fruit in the world, used for 6,000 years in the Middle East. Although dates can be expensive due to harvesting techniques, they are a rich and concentrated source of nutrients.

Dates are a good source of B vitamins, including thiamin, niacin, and beta-carotene and a small amount of vitamin C. They contain vitamin K important for blood clotting and bone formation. Dates are a good source of antioxidants, mainly carotenoids and phenolics which fight aging and disease.

Dates also contain important minerals. Potassium is key in maintaining fluid balance and regulating blood pressure. Calcium and magnesium are important for strong bones and teeth, muscle contraction, energy production and cellular communication. They contain small amounts of iron which helps to carry oxygen in the blood and copper which plays a role in iron metabolism. Zinc is important for wound healing and immunity. Finally, selenium in dates plays a role in reproduction, hormone metabolism, DNA synthesis and acts as an antioxidant to protect against oxidation and infection.

Dates contribute both soluble and insoluble fiber. Insoluble fiber promotes healthy digestion and feeds healthy gut microbes that release additional nutrients from food that our digestion misses. These healthy microbes also defend against some forms of cancer. Insoluble fiber can also help relieve constipation. Soluble fiber helps lower cholesterol and stabilizes blood sugars.

Dates are easy to find since they are carried by most grocery stores. They are commonly golden brown with a crinkly skin due to the natural sugar crystals. Since they are mostly sugar, they make a great natural, whole food substitute for granulated sugar. By adding water to dried dates and blending, you can make date syrup or date paste which can be used in baking or even as a sweetener for tea or coffee. Because of their high sugar content, they are slow to spoil. You can leave them covered at room temperature for up to a week, or place them in an airtight container in the refrigerator for up to six months.

Things you can do with dates include adding chopped dates to oatmeal, salads or unsweetened yogurt. Toss into mashed potatoes or veggie stir fry. Use as a substitute for sugar in recipes and add chopped dates to cookies or nut breads. Try grinding dates with nuts to form flourless bake or no-bake pie crusts or make your own fig newtons from scratch. For a holiday treat, stuff dates with ground pistachios and top with unsweetened coconut, or press in a walnut half, pinch closed and roll in flax meal. You could even stuff with unsweetened peanut butter. Poke skewers in dates and use to decorate cakes, cupcakes, pies or other seasonal food displays. Since dates need no refrigeration, pack in school lunches or as a snack on long hikes.

This is a great time of year to include dates in your recipes. Swap out the refined white and brown sugar in your recipes and daily use for date paste or date syrup and get all the goodness this whole fruit has to offer.

